FREDDA BURWELL Holt and her husband, the writer John Dominis Holt, live in an old frame house in a still undeveloped valley. A single dirt road leads through the thick vegetation. A rickety bridge crosses the stream that flows past their garden.

The valley and the house seem full of presences. The Hawaiians lived simultaneously in what Westerners would call two worlds: the natural and the supernatural. Everything was full of spirits. The Hawaiians met them with awe, but not surprise.

Similarly, the artist, as he works, feels strange forces operating within him. His final product is not his alone. Moreover, looking at nature, he communes with something that remains unaccountable, something beyond what he sees merely with his physical eyes.

Fredda Holt works in series. Each painting is a deepening and rounding of the whole.

The first series is of schizophrenic women at Kaneohe hospital. Artists such as Hogarth and Gericault have often studied the insane to understand states of mind and emotion.

The illness of the subjects is not obvious, but unmistakable. A simple gesture, such as scratching a foot or tugging at a lock of hair is given just a slight exaggeration.

Sometimes the faces are concentrated to the point of obsession, the twist of the arms too tense. Some seem normal except for a certain disquieting untidiness in the hair, which seems to go beyond the roots. Others smile at an inner light that does not penetrate their skin.

The bare walls and floors of the institution form squares and rectangles that isolate the patients, box them into empty space, and place a vacuum between them and the rest of the world.

In “Alone,” a girl sits on the floor and leans against a wall. Three architectural lines meet at the corner behind her head and divide her mind.

Most of these patients are young girls. The pinks and yellows are randing.

Fredda Holt’s second series, used to illustrate her husband’s Monarchy in Hawaii, is of the ali’i from Kamehameha III to Prince Kuhio. The paintings resemble the portrait style of the time of the subjects: full-length, life-size, formal, with large gold frames.

The viewer has the uncanny feeling that the ali’i really sat for the artist, talked with her as she painted them, and let her into the secrets of their lives and characters.

In fact, the artist did feel a strong sense of communion with her subjects. As she was painting Princess Ruth, she was suddenly moved to put oleanders in her hair, which seemed inappropriate and perhaps unhistorical.

Only later did she discover that oleanders were Princess Ruth’s favorite flower.

The artist was surprised that Kamehameha III turned out to be so strong. He appears almost the most Hawaiian, with dark skin and the deepest feeling of the great aloha of the chief for his subjects. A note of apprehension is in his eyes.

Kamehameha IV is intelligent, idealistic and young. The perfect fit of his uniform over his beautiful body gives hope that Hawaii will survive as the best of two worlds, despite personal tragedies.

Kamehameha V, a great shambled giant, seems dragged down by his uniform and gold braid. His head is bowed, sensing the end.
Lunalilo is encircled by his portrait and blocked in by its heavy border and frame. As the strength drains from his sensitive face, he shrinks into a miniature.

On the other hand, Princess Ruth, in a second portrait, corseted and dressed in expensive European clothes, remains a colossus of defiant bulk.

The ali‘i become such living presences with whom we can commune that we are shocked when the sombre gray and brown tones remind us of their deaths. Looming ancestral portraits hanging on the wall become magic images of aumakua; dead ancestors felt as still such living forces that they are worshipped as family gods.

From the aumakua, Fredda Holt turned to the akua, the principal gods of the Hawaiian religion. Her point of departure is the feathered Hawaiian idols kept in chiefly families: the representations of the gods, artistic masterpieces, in which the godly power itself was believed to reside.

Fredda Holt’s portraits of the portraits of the gods also give one a strong feeling of communion with the very distinct personalities of the subjects. One establishes a definite personal relationship with each; some are dangerous, others protective. As an erstwhile theologian, I was immediately drawn to the god of a kahuna family.

These portraits are, in fact, genuine cultic images. They enable us to feel the ancient Hawaiian religion, just as in the ali‘i series we feel the mana of the chiefs.

In the Holt’s overlooked valley, an important part of the Hawaiian world has found a refuge and a medium.

John Charlot